

Short-changed

The plight of U.S. universities in the age of economic instability, or around the bend: The University of California in the present age

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Public universities in the US are now confronted with conflicts in their missions of access and quality, in the form of legitimacy, as they face severe funding reductions as a result of states' responses to the Great Recession. With an US\$800 million budget shortfall, the University of California has chosen to maintain its preeminent position among public universities in the US. This article examines the conditions for this choice and the impending outcomes.

Introduction: Hanging on, or stasis in a dynamic environment

What has been referred to as The Great Recession (Rampell, 2009) in the US might be seen as an opportunity for university leaders and all their staff to consider different ways of thinking about their practices and their institutions' purposes. Yet, in the main what has emerged are schemes and proposals to preserve and indeed enhance past practices and structures. Universities and colleges have worked to 'hang on': to maintain what they have and if necessary then to reduce expenditures by increments, across the board, and using expendable labour as a means of preservation of structures and practices. Nowhere is this more evident than in California where the University of California could be undergoing massive restructuring and resultant organisational change but instead is calmly conducting 'business as usual' through a rational process of decision-making and actions. This condition is consistent with trends nationally following the Great Recession (the term given to the 2008 economic collapse of several financial sectors in the US): considerable economic declines for US universi-

ties and colleges, and an absence of major structural change. Responses by institutions suggest increasing gaps between wealthy and not wealthy students, in the quality of education and, according to higher education scholar Roger Geiger, long term jeopardy for research at distinguished universities, as public support for greater expenditures is unlikely (Geiger, 2010). This lack of institutional structural change is presently the case for the University of California, with potential for further social stratification with students funnelled into specific institutional types—community colleges, state comprehensive universities, and research universities—based largely upon their socio-economic status. The immediate future—the coming decade—appears equally bleak for not only the University of California but for all of Californian public higher education (Douglass, 2010a, 2010b).

Within this context and in an effort to consider major structural change, the Regents of the University of California (UC) established a commission (The University of California Commission on the Future) in 2009 to give a public and high profile face to a rational approach to address present problems and chart a course for a more prosperous future.

'Chair Russell S. Gould is charged with developing a new vision for the University within the context of the University's mission, while reaffirming UC's commitment to access, affordability and the highest levels of quality in instruction, research, public service and healthcare. UC must continue to play a vital role in sustaining California's economy and cultural life, operating strategically and as efficiently as possible within available resources in the midst of the State's dire financial crisis and into the future' (The University of California Commission on the Future, 2010).

Coming both before and after this commission have been individual campus initiatives and actions—there are 10 of these full-fledged research universities—to stem the tide of lost resources as a consequence of the state of California's structural budget shortfall of over US\$20 billion. The main task for 2009/10 for the entire University of California was to reduce expenditures by US\$800 million dollars and then determine a way or ways to either drop this amount from the budget in perpetuity, or at least until new revenue streams rose above US\$800 million. The magnitude of the problems is significant. Most universities do not have budgets of US\$800 million and numerous countries in the world do not have annual budgets totalling US\$20 billion, the present deficit for the state of California.

In addition to the University of California's reflections, 2010 marks the 50th anniversary of the state of California's higher education master plan – *A master plan for higher education in California, 1960-1975*. Not only has the continuing use of the plan extended its original time frame by 35 years but also the master plan has become symbolic for both those who want to extend its principles, or some of them, well into the 21st century (University Committee on Planning and Budget, 2010) and those who think that the master plan is at least an outdated if not a retrograde concept (Douglass, 2010a). For proponents, the idea of access to further education means affordable education and quality education that will help transform California's economy and propel its citizens into prosperity. The change in the pattern of inexpensive higher education, and for years no cost higher education for students, is repugnant to these proponents. For opponents, the stratified system of higher education has simply increased disparities between haves and have-nots, largely played out as an opportunity gap for people of colour. While the University of California, seemingly undergoing financial stress, continues to maintain rather impressive outcomes—Nobel awards for

academic staff, nationally competitive research grant acquisition, and publication productivity placing at least two of the campuses in the very top tier internationally, as well as graduation rates for students as high as any public universities in the nation—the two other sectors, California State Universities and California Community Colleges, are not doing well by some measures, particularly with moving students to completion of programs (Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy, 2010; Shulock & Moore, 2007). In other words, the elite institution has prospered and the less elite and the low status ones have faltered.

California and its university

A more coherent and explanatory perspective of the University of California is developed by placing these concerns within the context of not only the social culture of California itself and what is referred to as the California idea (Douglass, 2000). In the California idea, progress, innovation, and personal fulfilment for all citizens are strong ideological components if not enacted practices of Californians (Rice, Bullough, & Orsi, 1988; Schrag, 1998) but also within the context of what can only be termed neoliberalism (Duggan, 2003).

Yet, a demand-driven approach to postsecondary education, including access as a value framed as equity (Wilson, Newell, & Fuller, 2010), and a gold rush mentality for boom and bust cycles, with prosperity believed to be just around the corner, are uneasy company for elite organisations. The University of California seeks both legitimacy and financial resources as the two pillars of its survival as an elite organisation. Its dependency upon resources is structured by its drive for elite status (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997).

Thus, it cannot rely upon the wrong sources for resources and its status is dependent upon its institutional context as a public university (Colyvas & Powell, 2006; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). While survival, growth, and elaboration of structure are organisational imperatives (Mintzberg, 1983, 1994), symbolic action (Morgan, 2006) is viewed as necessary for the University of California to maintain its identity as an specific kind of organisation.

Its leaders and indeed its academics resort to the rhetoric that characterises the institution as prestigious:

'The University has evolved into the best public institution in the world over its 140 year history as a result of great leadership and supportive poli-

cies, and particularly due to the commitment of the public and state leaders to the Master Plan for Higher Education' (UC Academic Council, 2010).

On the one hand, the University of California is legitimated by its international status; on the other hand, its reputation has become a shaper of its actions as the institution cannot maintain its legitimacy without adhering to global expectations. Hence, globalisation of higher education is in play for the institution as globalisation is a major resource process for economic prosperity and international prestige (Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, & Perraton, 1999; J. Levin, 2001; Marginson & Considine, 2000; Waters, 1995). Consequently, forces from several domains affect the University. These include the economic, cultural, political, and technological, as well as the state and national governments, in its quest for pre-eminence.

All of this can be placed within a state and national context of considerable articulations about the University of California, both from within the University itself, focused upon swaying the public and policy makers both within the state and nationally, and from outside observers. These range from local presses highlighting the severe budget problems for state universities and the resultant cutting of classes that reduces access, with student marches and protests in the mix (Solomon, 2009) to the on-going pronouncements, and letters from UC president, Mark Yudof, as well as nationally syndicated interviews (Rosenhall, 2010; Yudof, 2009). The national spotlight that focuses upon the University of California is not only a sign of its prominence but also a reminder of the vulnerability of public institutions and often their lack of ability to adapt, reform, or even choose a different identity. As a result of these pressures, the University of California has little choice but to remain as it is: maintain its institutional identity, enact as few changes as possible, or only those that have minor symbolic value, and stay the course, looking for the next gold claim around the bend. Moreover, the imperative for the maintenance and even an increase in elite status has repercussions, many of which are not consistent with the public good charge of state funded institutions.

For one, increased elite status will close or curtail access for specific populations. The consequences of elitism are in part a function of population demographics. As populations in general grow, existing higher education institutions must rationalise their product. The example of the California master plan is instructive. In 1960, the charge was for the University of California

to admit the top 12 per cent of academically able high school graduates and with participation rates in the 1960s lower than in the 1990s or 2000s, the University could accommodate this population (Douglass, 2000). But, by 2009, and even earlier on several campuses, neither space nor resources were sufficient to accommodate this group and thus admissions had to be further rationed with entry granted only to a smaller proportion of academically accomplished students.

The further repercussions in the case of California are that rejected students at a UC are pushed, theoretically, into California State Universities (CSU) or California Community Colleges (CCC). However, by 2009 both of these institutions were without sufficient space and resources to accommodate the demand. Thus, for the period of 2009-2011 the CSU with 23 campuses and approximately 450,000 students is expected to turn down 40,000 students and the CCC will say 'no' to between 150,000-250,000 potential students, according to the President of the California League for Community Colleges. While the University of California became more selective and more able and wealthy students found a place there, less able and poorer students entered or were denied entry by the CSU. Those denied entry found a line at a community college where they would in many cases be admitted at the expense of other students who were either too indecisive about applying for entrance or who were too poor to pay fees in advance of the start of classes. At community colleges, typically, those who are either already students or those who are willing to apply and pay early are first in line for courses. As a result of this bumping phenomenon, populations customarily enrolled in community colleges in California in 2008 and before were faced with closed doors in 2009 and after. Not only will this lead to further stratification by economic status (and correspondingly by race and ethnicity) of the public higher education sector in California but also the very poor and less able are denied postsecondary education.

Rather than expanding access to top tier institutions, California has expanded opportunities for Californians to engage in greater risk-taking: barred from admission to UC because of less than a superior grade point average (less than 3.7/4.0); shut out of CSU because of space and resource scarcity; limited in course choices at a community college to perhaps none at all; or avoiding college altogether. The well-publicised and oft quoted policy report that suggests that California requires a staggering increase of over a million college

degrees in the coming two decades (Johnson & Sengupta, 2009; Reed, 2008) can only be viewed now as a 'pipe-dream'. The probable outcomes for the next two decades in California are a decline in baccalaureate attainment rates.

The broader national picture

California, however, is not so unlike the political economy and political culture of the rest of the US. In the face of the Great Recession's aftermath, US education policy directs institutions to greater productivity, particularly with respect to student outcomes, measured by degree or credential-of-some-type of attainment. Both the Lumina Foundation for Education and the Gates Foundation, with grant-making assets in the billions and the inclination to use their assets to stimulate progress in education on a national scale, are at the forefront of this press, along with accrediting agencies.

The drive for credential attainment follows President Obama's call for a 60 per cent increase in credential attainment by 2025 for the US. Although the federal funding to support this initiative was removed from the approved health care bill, there were and

continue to be calls from policy makers, private funding agencies, and institutional leaders, as well as the federal Department of Education, for the achievement of Obama's goal. At the same time as this emphasis on unprecedented levels of growth in credentialing, state funding for colleges and universities has either not kept pace with demand or more commonly decreased from previous years.

In the case of universities, this has meant relying upon students to pay more in order to participate. The trend of asking citizens (as well as international students) to pay more for public education is further muddying the waters on the private and public goods debate (Labaree, 1997). Tuition fees have risen over 30 per cent since 2008. Even a former 1960s radical and later US politician has weighed in on the issue, contrasting the closing of the door to higher education in the present to the opening of the doors in the 1960s and opining the loss of democratic change in America (Hayden, 2010).

With the Great Recession and its effects upon higher education, particularly the diminution of state funding for colleges and universities, the role of the State as an interventionary state (Goedegebuure, Kaiser, Maassen, & De Weert, 1993) in the manner of France or Australia seemed a possibility in the affairs of universities and colleges, but only briefly. Furthermore, the failure of hyper-capitalism, particularly evident in the US suggested that neoliberalism was no longer the dominant political economy of choice. To date, however, the State in the US has not shed its neoliberal inclinations, attempting to prop up neoliberal values that privilege private goods, individual achievement, and economic benefits (Apple, 2001; Clarke, 2005; Puiggros, 1999).

For example, President Obama's American Graduation Initiative, a targeted effort to enhance the workforce development function in service of national and global economic competitiveness, did not even survive through the political process for a congressional

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vote, and was a casualty of the health care backlash against government intervention in the lives of Americans. When state intervention is apparent in the US such as No Child Left Behind legislation, it comes with performance measures and without funding for the mandate. In

that the US has the least advanced social safety net of OECD countries for its population, state intervention in the US can have a punishing outcome (Lipset, 1996).

No doubt, this is why neoliberalism in the US is viewed as pernicious (Giroux, 2004). Its perpetuation through institutions of higher education is strenuously challenged as some do within the University of California whether they take a financial perspective on the responsibility of the state for educational declines (Glantz & Hays, 2009) or the behaviours of the University itself (Samuels, 2010). These behaviours include University efforts to maintain elite status through the deification of big science and actions that threaten if not the humanities enterprise then at least humanities academics (Watson, 2010).

On campus at the University of California

In 2008-09, University of California campuses were engaged in not so much the preservation of elite

status, as the resolution of a budget shortfall that compelled campus leaders and governance committees, as well as system-wide executives, to find ordinary financial solutions to permit the continuation of day-to-day operations beginning July 1, 2009 (University Committee on Planning and Budget, 2010). One of these campuses, Riverside, during the period of 2008/09 to 2009/2010 illustrates the tensions between the organisational imperative for survival and the continuing pursuit of legitimacy; in this case, both survival and legitimacy have deeply institutionalised characteristics and patterns.

As a relatively recent entrant (in 1954) to the University of California sphere, University of California, Riverside (UCR) does not command the international prestige of Berkeley or University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), although it follows the same UC directives, institutional regulations, and norms, including standards for promotion, tenure, and merit for academics. UCR is a smaller institution than most of the 10 campuses and its undergraduate population is considerably more ethnically diverse than any other campus, with the exception of the newest UC, Merced, a campus with approximately 3,500 students. It has a proportionally smaller graduate student population than is typical for a UC, but its addition of an engineering program in the past few decades and its approval for a medical school, recently initiated, will propel professional school enrolments and likely lead to increases in graduate student numbers.

Similar to all other UC campuses, UCR was subject to the Great Recession, which led in the 2008/09 academic year to all campuses confronting the UC budget shortfall of US\$800,000,000 for the following years. For UCR, the budget shortfall, first announced at approximately US\$21,000,000 grew progressively from January 2009 to the end of May 2009 when it approached and then slightly exceeded US\$50,000,000. The total budget for the year 2008/09 was US\$294,136,339 (Office of the Provost, 2009). By May, the provost's budget advisory committee proposed only US\$17,000,000 in cuts, although they had been working for several months on the goal of US\$20,000,000, close to the US\$21 million shortfall. In the first case the cut of US\$21,000,000 was a 7 per cent figure of the overall budget; in the second case, the cut (US\$50,000,000) would have to be close to 17 per cent of the University's operating expenditures (J. S. Levin, 2009).

These budget reductions were both common across all University of California campuses and singular for

individual campuses. The centralised-decentralised system that is the University of California leads to system-wide policies, regulations, and actions on the one-hand and individual campus actions reflecting campus quasi-autonomy. The budget shortfall was a system-wide condition but individual campuses varied in their financial situations. System-wide, a salary cut was implemented for all academics and administrators and most staff (some unions rejected this approach and legally the University could not demand salary reductions). This salary cut took the form of 'furloughs'—days off without pay, with the days off determined by the salary level of employees. Such action, however, did not actually translate into days off as employees continued to show up for work, whether in their homes or at institutional sites.

On the UCR campus, a target of reductions was set for each major unit and heads of units—vice-presidents, deans, directors, and the like—had to rationalise their actions. The first action was to secure enough of unit fiscal resources to see the University through the 2009-2010 budget year; the second action was to delete a percentage of their total fiscal resources permanently to see the University into subsequent years (J. S. Levin, 2009). The imperative for these actions was largely to preserve the academic missions of the University, and thus support services and administrative functions were most affected, although non-academic activities such as athletics, fundraising, technological services were retained almost in total. Furthermore, no academic programs were jettisoned (J. S. Levin, 2009), and in 2010 enrolment increased substantially (7 per cent), the result of the University admitting well over 1000 additional freshmen, or first year, students (Campos, 2010).

Almost coincident to this budget reduction exercise, a campus-wide strategic planning process was initiated. This effort led, in March 2010, to the first draft of the strategic plan—UCR 2020—which was not tied directly to the budget reduction process (University of California Riverside, 2010b). A third and final draft was completed in June 2010. Among the primary stated intentions of UCR 2020 were simultaneously the preservation of student access to the University and an increase in national stature, signalled by membership into the American Association of Universities (AAU), a prestigious organisation for universities. By access, UCR meant maintaining or increasing standards for entry but ensuring 'affordability,' as suggested by UCR 2020.

'UC Riverside is committed to upholding its role as articulated in the California Master Plan for Higher Education, which created a system that combines exceptional quality with broad access for students...Helping qualified students to gain access to a UC education – particularly in the face of dramatically increasing fees – is a fundamental value of UC Riverside' (University of California Riverside, 2010b, p. 17).

But access is coupled with student attainment, and improvement of students' graduation rates will enable the University to gain in prestige. Thus, access is not for everyone, but rather for high achieving students, and this coupling of access with probability of graduation permits the University to become more selective in admissions.

'Access alone is insufficient; UC Riverside also focuses on providing high-quality academic programs and support services to ensure our students' success. Through a commitment to access as well as student success, UCR will attract highly motivated and high-achieving students, both those who reflect the diversity of our state and those who offer an international perspective; improve retention and time to degree; and increase students' satisfaction with their UCR experience. All of these are transformative and critical in the campus' rise to pre-eminence' (University of California Riverside, 2010b, p. 17).

Such an approach addresses the heavy pressure on the University to meet aspirations of constituents. These included the regional community for a medical school; research-oriented academics for national recognition; administrators for both cost-savings and revenue generation while maintaining the diverse undergraduate population that characterises the University nationally and brings in grant funding; and, humanities and social science academics who want to preserve the quality of their programs in the face of financial losses. Furthermore, this approach ties UCR to the other UC campuses, especially the top tier ones. One characteristic of the more prestigious UC institutions—Berkeley and Los Angeles—is that their percentages of students of colour have dropped as the institutions have relied upon primarily academic background as admissions criteria (Tomas Rivera Policy Institute, 2004).

What this drive for national prominence means, certainly in planning, is the privileging of particular behaviours of academics and administrators. These include for academics the emphasis upon publication and funded research, as clearly articulated by one sub-

committee of the Strategic Planning Committee (University of California Riverside, 2010a). Here the call for coupling research grant applications to merit review of academics is qualified with 'in fields where grants are important' and with rewarding successful grant procurement with reductions in teaching.

Grant productivity on campus is low by AAU standards. We recommend setting expectations for grant seeking as part of merit reviews in fields where grants are important; regular discussions by Deans of the performance of departments and research units in chairs meetings and other venues; rewarding individuals who are obtaining grants with credit on merits and/or reduced teaching; finding seed funds for the preparation of multi-investigator grants; and exploring ways to allocate indirect costs to provide incentives for higher levels of grant submission (University of California Riverside, 2010a. p. 1).

Not more than a month after the dissemination of the first draft of UCR 2020, the Academic Senate of the Riverside campus released the results of a survey of tenure track academics during the November–December 2009 period (University of California Riverside. Survey Research Center, 2010). The results show that there are divisions among academics on the topic of emphasis on grant seeking, although the majority thinks the emphasis is either acceptable or not enough. More telling is the perception that academic morale has decreased over a one-year period, with the budget crisis viewed as playing a significant role in this trend.

For administrators, the emphasis in UCR 2020 is upon tightening up admissions in favour of the more accomplished students, providing more resources to units that contribute to the aspirations of the campus for elite status, and providing leadership and management expected of an elite institution, including showing greater transparency in the budget process. In the face of these expectations of administrators, the academic survey results express little confidence in the administration, generally, with only a small minority of academics viewing both the campus budget process and long-range academic planning as transparent or clear. Furthermore, there is considerable variation among academics from specific units whether or not campus administrative leaders are judged to understand academics' concerns. Likely, campus administrators' behaviours are too much shaped by institutional practices and resource scarcity to realise these aspirations.

The present moment

It is precisely in the present, when the University of California, Riverside seeks both legitimacy and financial resources as the two pillars of its survival as an elite organisation and in the face of a significant budget crisis, that the theoretical underpinnings of organisational and institutional life become most apparent. UCR is set on a pattern of action commensurate with its institutional aspirations; conversely, its dependency upon resources to attain elevated status is limiting aspirations.

Additionally and perhaps most importantly, in order to satisfy tenure track academics (the core operators of the University), the actions of the University in both addressing the budget problems and in advancing the University's status must be carried out within the more traditional value-context articulated by academics. That is, collegiality, respect for others, transparency of processes, and administrative support for and understanding of academic work, among others. UCR has placed itself in two rather pervasive environments: the institutional environment of an elite research university; and the global economic environment of competition for higher education institutions.

Competition for resources includes competition for status as that marker can bring finances in the form of donations, private contracts, government and foundation grants, and higher fees from students as well as higher performing students that beget higher status for the institution. Theories of symbolic action notwithstanding (Pfeffer, 1981), whether it is Yudof as president of the University of California or the chancellor of UCR, Timothy White, the University is trapped in the nexus between aspirational identity and its dependency upon state government resources. Part of its identity, however, is its public nature as well as its proclaimed identity as a special kind of public institution, one that has provided access to a highly ethnically diverse student body.

There is no end in sight, certainly no forward progression toward greater institutional status or legitimacy as long as UCR is resource dependent upon the state, which is its destiny through historical legislative behaviours (Douglass, 2000). And in California, a politically divided state with a democratic legislative majority but a requirement for a two-thirds majority for budgetary legislation, there have been cutbacks on government spending on higher education. Polarisation in state politics in California, as in other states,

means fewer dollars for higher education (Dar, 2009). Far be it, however, for a public university to withdraw from the public sphere and reject state financing in order to enter the uncertain economic marketplace where risk-taking is certain and organisational survival is doubtful. Either UC Riverside must wait for times that are more prosperous—the gold rush around the corner—or modify its reputational aspirations for elite status and settle on a reputation for access to ethnically diverse students and remain an outsider to AAU. This would place UCR near the bottom of the hierarchy of University of California campuses, but ideology, which includes institutional aspirations, is more malleable than reality.

There is no doubt that UCR shares some characteristics of other research universities in the US, and those faced now or in the future with budgetary crises may confront the problem of institutional legitimacy if they choose to abandon aspirational identities as elite institutions. While California's University of California, with its 10 research universities, has been a model for not only the US but also internationally of a preeminent public university, the model is on shaky foundations as its perpetuation will mean the erosion of access, usurped by the maintenance of elite status. Unless the public is willing to fund the University at higher levels to maintain broad access for students, both the University and the public will be short-changed. The institution—the University of California—with its present trajectory will become the fulfilment of the neoliberal project where private outcomes trump public ones.

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